

Betty McCollum, U.S. Congresswoman

In November we choose our future

After the first photographs of the tormenting of captives in the Iraqi prison, American Congress member Betty McCollum asked for the resignation of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. At that time the Bush administration was still refusing to face reality and admit its responsibility. Demands for Rumsfeld's resignation were growing louder and louder, but then Bush's closest team announced to the public that the resignation was not coming and that Rumsfeld was performing his job as first warrior in Iraq exceptionally well.

"I am further hurt, disappointed, and still feel the same about what happened at Abu Ghraib. The majority of Americans feel that way – our sons, daughters, spouses, brothers, friends are there. It's hard to comprehend how our soldiers did that. But the orders came from the top, and so the top must bear responsibility. What we got instead of that was praise for Rumsfeld's work," says Betty McCollum in a conversation with *Ekonomist*, adding that the U.S.A. is a superpower but that this constitutes no license for arrogant behavior outside of all international conventions and rules, such as what happened in the Abu Ghraib prison."

Credibility

"I was also hurt by what happened in Pennsylvania and New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. But that doesn't mean we can punish in such a way people who are not guilty, at least whose guilt has not been proven and who someone merely suspects are our potential enemies. We know the structure of prisoners at Abu Ghraib." But not only Abu Ghraib is in question.

This week Betty McCollum addressed Washington, asking President Bush to invite a U.N. Special Reporter on Torture and enable him to carry out a full and impartial investigation in the American military prisons in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In addition to the already widely published photographs from Iraq, more and more information of a similar sort is arriving from Afghanistan – among other things, the truth about the death of two prisoners that the Pentagon reported as having committed suicide.

"The situation is now like an onion, it's peeled layer by layer. Rumsfeld should give up his post. In addition, in Congress he tells us one thing but then in the media we hear and read his differing statements to the public. In the world's eyes the moral authority and position of our country as a leader in human rights has been brought into question by what the world has witnessed in Iraq. And now, instead of this nation facing and answering its international obligations, the Pentagon is conducting some internal investigations but the House of Representatives is evading its constitutional obligation to declare the Executive Branch responsible."

That is the basis of a letter that McCollum has addressed to Bush, and which ten other members of Congress (so far) have signed together with her. She believes that the average American is aware of exactly what is happening, and how greatly – and where – Washington, at present, is out of step with reality.

How aware are they of the growing anti-Americanism in the world and the consequences that it may have in the long run? How aware is Bush's Washington of that, and how much do they even care about it?

"I've traveled around the world in the last few years, and everywhere they ask me what is happening in our country. I know what people expect of us, what we've promised. But some things have been said, done to our own detriment. Among other things, what was meant by "Old Europe"? Our allies have not turned their backs on us as a coalition partner, they still want an alliance, like those that we had for the Gulf War or in Afghanistan. But not this one that was made in the case of Iraq. This administration has not apologized for anything. I was in Baghdad, we promised something to those people and to the world, that we would bring them peace, recovery. What have we done? We must restore our credibility, remain and be a superpower but work for the good and for those values that we ourselves defend at home," says Betty McCollum.

The Elections

As fall approaches, and with it the most vital part of the electoral campaign, it is more and more certain that Bush's camp – in spite of everything that is not going their way at the moment – will insist to the end on war, the struggle

against terrorism, and patriotism as a pledge for their prospective victory. The Democratic Party traditionally emphasizes social questions first and foremost in its campaigning.

"We will continue our policy. We believe in a better future for this country even if at the moment it does not look that way. But with proper leadership we can have the kind of future that we want, which will enable us to restore credibility both in our country and in the world. People in America today are not happy, they don't see a future for their children. Four years ago Bush promised to protect Social Security and accelerate education, and that his tax policy would stimulate employment and economic growth to unlimited heights. What we have now from those promises is high unemployment, unreasonable and financially inaccessible health care for our eldest fellow citizens, public educational institutions that are federalized but in which the government does not invest, overly expensive education; people work longer than ever for much less pay, if they have a job at all...so were we better off four years ago? Then the economy was operating with a surplus, now we have a huge deficit that is only getting deeper. For four years there has not been investment in infrastructure, in employment, in the country's security. The American economy is big and powerful, but people here have always had big dreams for themselves and for their children, and now they realize that they can no longer dream big."

Does that mean that social issues will trump the war machinery in the November elections?

"A very important date is before us – June 30, when the President will have to tell us what is going to happen in Iraq (power should then be handed over to the Iraqis). But it is certain that people understand, on a personal, everyday level, where we are. One thing must be clear. Bush lost the elections four years ago. The Supreme Court elected him. Disappointed as we were, we in the Democratic Party accepted the situation as it is – and that is something that I worship this country for – nothing happened, not one bullet was fired. We have procedures and respect them. We in the Democratic Party were then very disappointed with the outcome of the election, but we pledged to work more diligently for the next elections. And believe me, when you hear Americans say that they are not happy, that they are worried about their children's future because they will not be able to afford for themselves what their parents can, that says a lot in itself," declares Betty McCollum.

Four years ago, indeed, a large number of Americans were undecided, dissatisfied both with the Republicans and with the Democrats. Many, because of that dissatisfaction, then voted for a "third," independent, candidate. Is a third strong party a potential political player in the U.S.A.?

"Our system is not parliamentary and is not set up to operate that way. And when someone votes for a third candidate, then he must also accept the consequences, because the outcome of the voting may not be a desirable one. In addition, this is a huge and very diverse country, and the question is who would make up that third party. It's more important for the two existing parties to include in their ranks people of different orientations and opinions. We in the Democratic Party have that, and we continuously work on it, we have diversity. The Republicans today lack that. Recently we have had a very large number of people changing parties, joining us. That is a very significant fact."

Betty McCollum believes that the November elections will bring a change. Although there are five months left until voting time, and thus a multitude of possibilities of substantial changes occurring on the American political scene, she affirms that Americans are aware of the exceptional importance of these elections, in which not only the country's next president will be elected.

"In November we decide on our future, on potential economic growth, the future role that the U.S.A. will have in the world, and, above all, the future of our children."

Aleksandra Ajdani, U.S.A.

Commentary on the text

[top of page]